



National Park Service Wilderness Action Plan

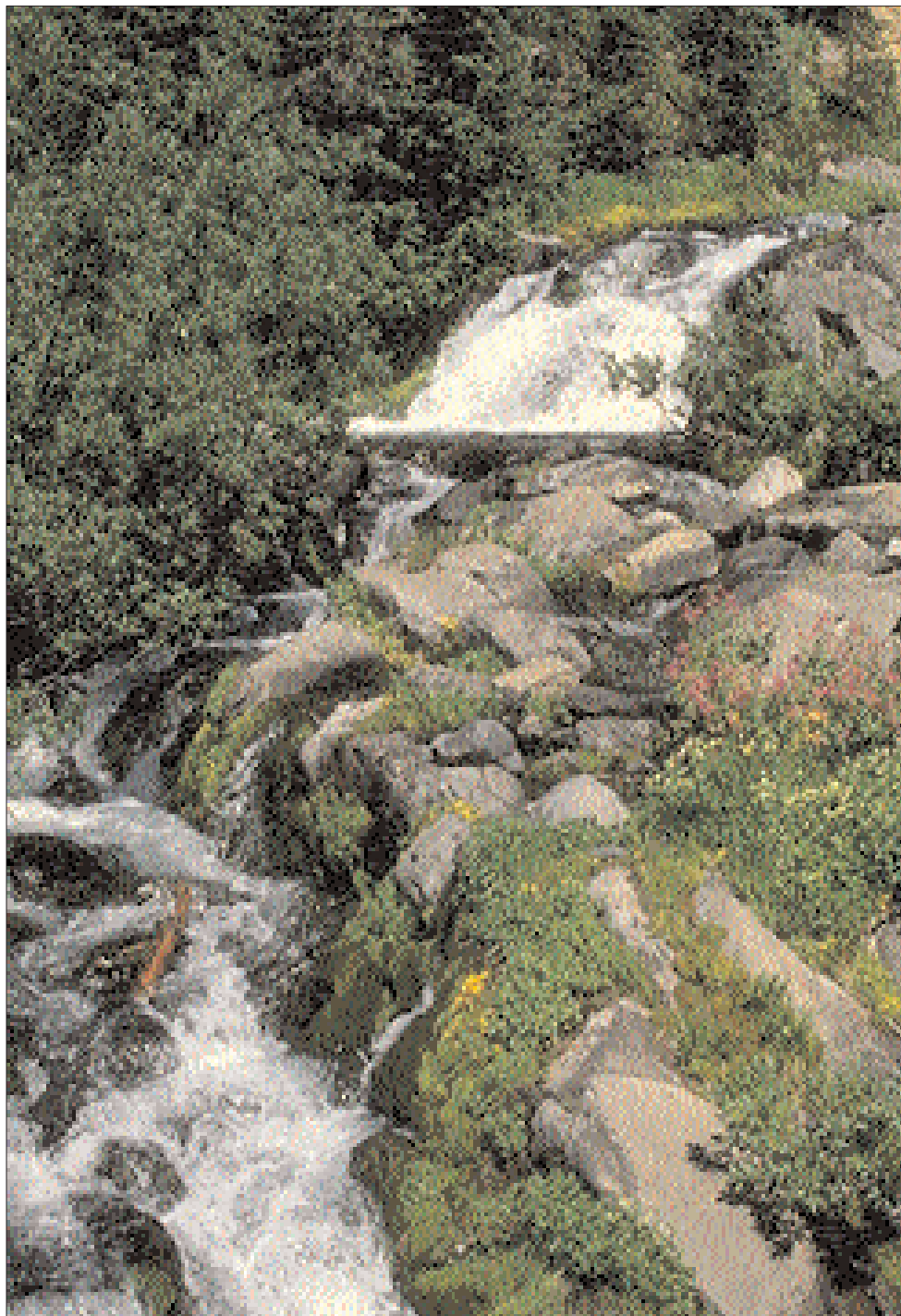
National Wilderness Steering Committee
April 2004

“The mountains can be reached in all seasons. They offer a fighting challenge to heart, soul and mind, both in summer and winter. If throughout time the youth of the nation accept the challenge the mountains offer, they will keep alive in our people the spirit of adventure.”

--William O. Douglass



Prepared by
National Wilderness Steering Committee
National Park Service
April 2004



National Park Service *Wilderness Action Plan* to Preserve the Enduring Quality of Wilderness

*An Action Plan for Enhancing Wilderness Stewardship in the
National Park System*

The *National Park Service Wilderness Action Plan*, produced by the National Park Service Wilderness Steering Committee, identifies and addresses the major issues facing wilderness management. Experts and the NPS leadership identified these issues as the most important and compelling wilderness management issues in need of resolution. This proposed action plan contains summary descriptions of the issues involved, the actions proposed to address these challenges, and guidance on implementing components of the plan.

Background

Wilderness is a special portion of the National Park System that American citizens and the United States Congress have jointly declared will be kept as wild and natural as possible. Wilderness designation is a declaration of people's care and desire to protect special areas in the National Park System. As a result of the Wilderness Act of 1964 and subsequent legislation, 46 national parks contain 44 million acres of designated wilderness—nearly 53 percent of all Park Service lands (see attached listing of parks with wilderness).

By passing wilderness legislation, Congress reduced the discretion NPS managers had in choosing among a variety of development options and recreational uses. In addition, they decided that park service areas should be evaluated for wilderness designation and if appropriate, some areas be managed as wilderness. Although national parks are protected areas, Congress chose to apply the Act to the National Park Service to augment protection of these areas. It was apparently responding to the trend within the agency to make parks more and more accessible and comfortable to visitors through additional development.

Consequently, the Wilderness Act supplements the National Park Service's basic statutory authority and requires it to evaluate its lands for wilderness designation and to manage those suitable areas to preserve their wilderness character for present and future generations. In addition to adding greater affirmation of the importance of keeping parts of parks in a wild and undeveloped condition, it specifically has the following legal effects on administrative discretion available under the 1916 Organic Act:



- No commercial enterprise is allowed except those commercial services necessary for activities proper for realizing the recreational and other wilderness purposes (e.g. outfitters and guides);
- No permanent roads are allowed except those subject to existing private rights;
- No temporary roads are allowed except as necessary to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the area for the purposes of the Act;
- With the same “minimum requirement” exceptions, no use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment, motorboats, landing of aircraft, mechanical transport, structures, or installations are allowed.

Congress often acts to add specific legislative provisions to specific wilderness area enabling legislation. The most notable example is the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) that added eight large wilderness areas—and over 20 modifications to the Wilderness Act for Alaska wilderness. Some of the more obvious modifications include allowing motorized access (motorboats, snowmachines, and airplanes) for traditional activities and for travel to and from villages and homesites; subsistence activities including hunting, fishing, trapping, and the gathering of firewood and logs for cabins by local, rural residents; sport hunting in preserve units; temporary structures for taking of fish and wildlife in preserve units; provision for reasonable access across wilderness to private and state land including mining claims; and provisions for air and water navigation aids, communications sites, and facilities for weather, climate, and fisheries research and monitoring.



Challenge

Criticism of NPS stewardship of wilderness has increased from varied sources alleging a general lack of support for the basic purposes of the law and specific failures in organizational structure, training, decision-making, and integration with other federal agencies that managed wilderness, often contiguous to parks. Legislation proposed in 1992 would have required dramatic steps in NPS organization, planning, and other areas. NPS responded by asserting that it had administrative capacity and would act to implement the intent of the legislation. Over time, NPS has taken several actions to respond to criticisms regarding its wilderness management program.

Although the greatest need is for improved program support at the individual park level, the NPS also needs to strengthen the service-wide wilderness program. Lack of resources at the national level has precluded tracking of program efforts in the parks, a situation that makes it extremely difficult to evaluate needs, justify funding requests, prioritize spending, or measure progress and accountability. The NPS does not have enough resources to develop and coordinate the service-wide wilderness program, or to provide desperately needed expertise and technical support to the parks in areas such as planning. As a result, the NPS has not fully completed wilderness management plans, the review process, and excelled in management. These fundamental shortcomings make the agency and individual park managers potentially vulnerable to valid criticism and legal challenge.



The Wilderness Challenge

National Park wilderness, as the least manipulated environments in our country, can serve as refuges for declining species in the changing American landscape and special places for the public to escape from the increasing urbanization of American. Wilderness can also provide special areas of scientific value by which to assess the status of plant and animal species and these ecosystems can be compared to more manipulated areas. Comprehensive wilderness management, planning, research and designation are required to ensuring the enduring quality of wilderness.

Specific Goals and Objectives for a Future Wilderness Program

Following are Wilderness Action Plan goals, and relevant objectives:

Goal: *Wilderness legislation requires completion of legal descriptions and maps of national park wilderness areas.*

Objective: Complete legal descriptions and/or boundary maps for 10 park unit areas with designated wilderness.

Goal: *Review Potential Wilderness. These areas need to be review to allow conversion to full wilderness status.*

Objective: Within three years, review the 21 parks with potential wilderness and assess removal of non-conforming elements to allow full wilderness status.

Goal: *Complete Wilderness Review process.*

Objective: Review the 8 pre-1964 parks that need to complete the wilderness review process required by the Wilderness Act and complete in three years.

Objective: Complete the wilderness review process for 8 other parks whose legislation requires completion of wilderness studies.

Objective: Within three years, re-study 9 previously completed non-suitable wilderness suitability assessments to ensure their accuracy.

Objective: Within five years, review the existing 20 wilderness proposals at the Director's and Secretary's level, and if appropriate, forward them to the President.

Objective: Review and complete wilderness review process required for 20-25 parks by policy.

Goal: *Ensure effective long-term management through wilderness planning.*

Objective: Over the next ten years, complete appropriate wilderness planning documents for 22 park wilderness areas.

Goal: *Management of the national parks is improved through a greater reliance on scientific knowledge.*

Objective: Enhance scientific understanding necessary to inform wilderness management decisions.

Objective: Understand the status of native species and ecosystems, the distribution and extent of threatened and endangered species, and the principal threats to the ecological health of each wilderness park. Provide information on visitor experiences and impacts, and the consequences of options for managing visitor use.

Goal: *Enhance stewardship of NPS Wilderness through training for staff, visitor education, and educational outreach programs.*

Objective: Provide stewardship training for all parks with wilderness on a ten year cycle and provide the educational materials for park staff to use with visitors, school children, and neighbors.



Ongoing and Proposed Actions

Below are the actions in the *Wilderness Action Plan* that address the above issues, along with more detailed material where appropriate.

Actions to be Initiated Immediately

Potential Wilderness Conversion. Review parks with potential wilderness for conversion to full designated wilderness. Over three years, NPS will review the 21 units with potential wilderness and complete conversion for that acreage that is appropriate.

Vital Signs Monitoring. Current monitoring in networks will be reviewed to ensure wilderness areas are being monitored for vital signs. The NPS will begin identifying priority locations within each network to establish partnerships with non-NPS entities and learning centers for visiting researchers and outreach to initiate wilderness area research.

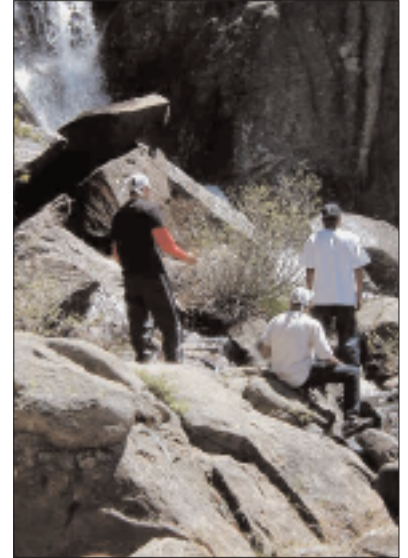
Provide Public Information. Continue park and national efforts to provide outreach to recreational users about the use of wilderness areas and their value to society for research and preservation of natural and cultural resources.

Wilderness Planning and Review. Continue on-going efforts to complete wilderness management planning or provide guidance to field areas in training and planning handbooks. In addition, review the wilderness proposals and possible forwarding to the appropriate next level.

Actions Requiring Future Budget Initiatives

Expand park bases to hire wilderness coordinators. For management coordination and implementation of wilderness projects, 15 wilderness coordinators are needed to address the needs of the 46 parks with designated wilderness.

Complete legal maps and descriptions of 10 park units. Of the 46 wilderness parks, 10 need legal descriptions and maps. Funds will be needed to contract for these services.



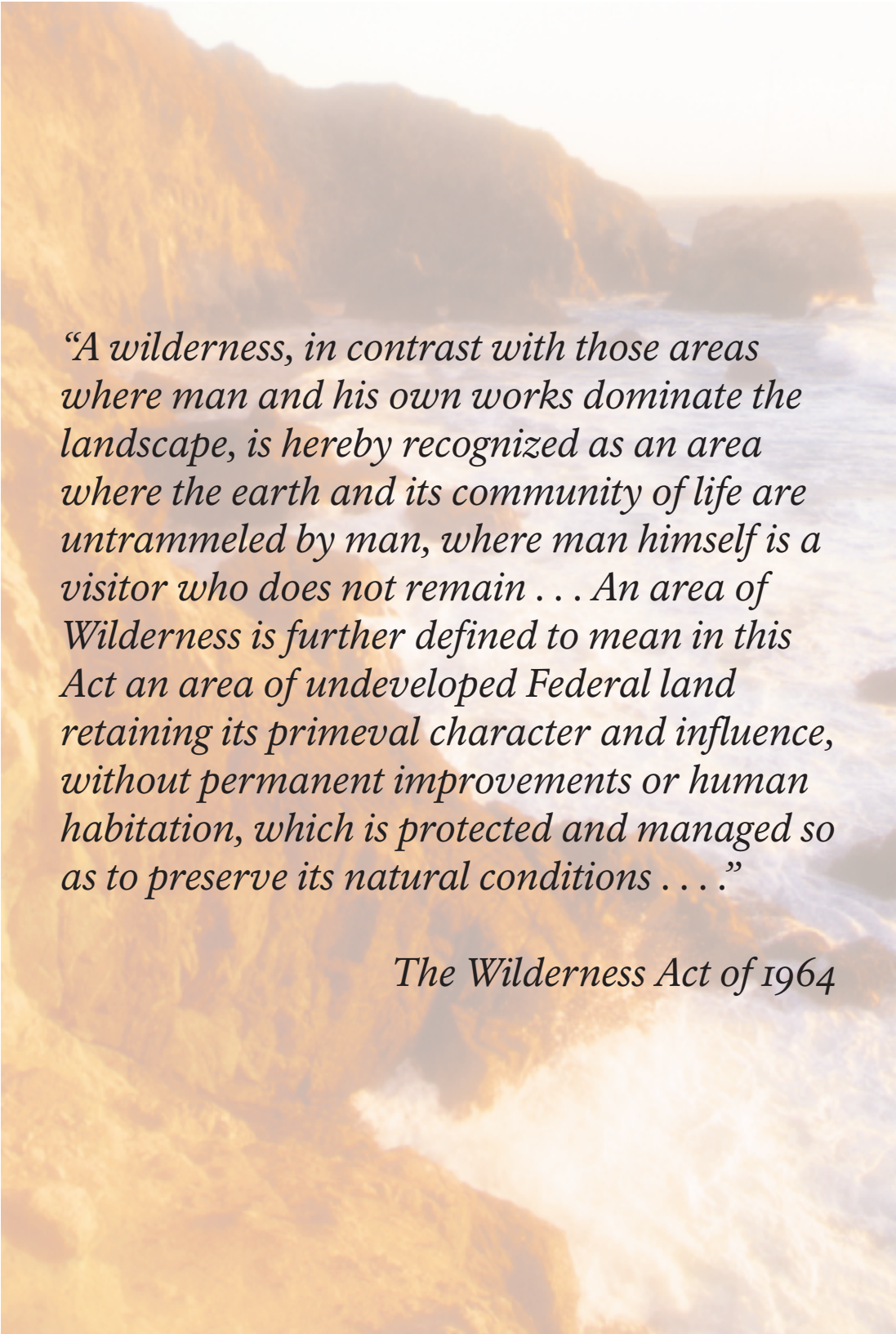
Complete legislatively mandated wilderness review process. This includes the 8 parks with the Wilderness Act requirement, 6 parks with a legislative wilderness study requirement (SEKI, EVER, BICY, BIBE, CHIS, APIS), and the review of 9 parks with a previous negative wilderness suitability assessment. An estimated 20 studies will be required, two per year. This would be by contract or a DSC team created for this purpose.

Expand capability for wilderness planning. Of the 46 wilderness parks, 12 parks currently have wilderness plans, another 12 have plans underway, and 22 parks need to complete wilderness management planning. A Wilderness Management Planning Handbook has been developed by the National Wilderness Steering Committee to facilitate this process.

Enhance training capacity at Carhart Training Center. Provide staff and project funds to support training and public information efforts. The Center provides support for web information and critical training opportunities for field and management staff.

Enhance capacity at the interagency Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute. Provide staff and project funds to support collaborative science programs and the application of research findings to difficult wilderness management decisions. The NPS has had a long standing, but unfilled commitment to an interagency partnership in supporting the development and application of the science necessary to inform wilderness management decisions to assure long term stewardship of these important lands.





“A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain . . . An area of Wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions”

The Wilderness Act of 1964



For more information on the whole National Wilderness Preservation System and each of its units, visit www.wilderness.net. This site, the Wilderness Information Network, serves as an “umbrella” site for several wilderness organizations: the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center, and the University of Montana’s Wilderness Institute. Wilderness.net is also a forum for current news, original wilderness publications, information on wilderness distance education opportunities, and a searchable wilderness document library.